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FM AMEMBASSY TASHKENT

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INFO ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

CIS COLLECTIVE

NATO EU COLLECTIVE

RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TASHKENT 000715

SIPDIS

AMEMBASSY ASTANA PASS TO USOFFICE ALMATY

AMEMBASSY HELSINKI PASS TO AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG

AMEMBASSY BELGRADE PASS TO AMEMBASSY PODGORICA

AMEMBASSY ATHENS PASS TO AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2019/05/12

TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL UZ

SUBJECT: ACTIVIST SHARES VIEWS ON TRENDS IN UZBEKISTAN

CLASSIFIED BY: Nicholas Berliner, Pol Econ Chief; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: On May 7, the Ambassador met with Bukhara-based human rights activist Shukhrat Ganiev, who argued that the recent government crackdown on independent groups over the past few months was largely driven by worries over presidential succession and the upcoming December 2009 Parliamentary elections. Since independence, President Karimov has been largely successful in eliminating potential rivals, including from opposition parties and religious extremists. Recently, however, there are signs of increasing competition between various interest groups at upper-levels of the regime, which Ganiev believed were largely driven by worries over President Karimov's age and the unresolved question of succession. In addition, Ganiev argued that deteriorating economic conditions in Uzbekistan's provinces posed a far greater long-term threat to the country's stability than religious extremists, and observed that the participation of schoolchildren in the annual cotton harvest each year was directly tied to rural poverty. Ganiev's insights are relevant to the upcoming visit of Uzbek Deputy Foreign Minister Karamatov to Washington on May 18-19 (please see Comment). End summary.

SECURITY SERVICES CLAMPING DOWN AS LEADERSHIP WAVERS

¶2. (C) Ganiev shared his belief that the Uzbek government was becoming somewhat less stable due to growing worries about President Karimov's age (he is now 71 years old), which in turn has led security services to clamp down even harder than usual on independent groups to avert any possible "foreign meddling" in the Uzbek succession process and forestall any sort of "color" revolution. Ganiev observed that there were increasing signs of a "lack of balance" at the upper-levels of the regime and increasing competition between various interest groups, which he believed was directly tied to the unresolved question of succession.

¶3. (C) Ganiev explained that prior to the violent Andijon events of 2005, the National Security Service (NSS) used to compete for influence with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD). However, since those events, in which the NSS was generally viewed as demonstrating itself to be more competent than the MVD, the NSS has decisively gained the upper-hand. For example, he noted that traditionally, one deputy minister position at each of the ministries was filled by a NSS officer. However, the NSS now controls as many as three deputy minister positions at each of the

most powerful government bodies, including the Ministry of Defense, MVD, and the tax agency.

UPCOMING ELECTION ALSO FACTOR BEHIND RECENT CLAMPDOWN

¶4. (C) Ganiev believed that the security services were also determined to avoid any possible surprises ahead of the Parliamentary Elections this December. For example, he was already reportedly warned by a NSS officer in January to lessen contacts with foreigners due to the election. Interestingly, however, Ganiev predicted that the government would make some concessions before the election, including releasing some political prisoners. In contrast to previous Parliamentary elections, Ganiev believed that several representatives from semi-independent non-governmental organizations (NGOs) would be elected this year, resulting in a slight liberalization.

BALANCING THE CLANS...AND WIPING OUT THE OPPOSITION

TASHKENT 00000715 002 OF 003

¶5. (C) Ganiev expressed his view that since independence, President Karimov has done a reasonably good job of balancing the interests of the various regional clans. He observed that while clan politics already permeated the MVD, the NSS has so far been largely immune. At the same time, he observed that Karimov had successfully sidelined the political opposition. He noted that Erk leader Muhammad Solih, who, according to Ganiev, used to be a leading figure in the Khorezm province clan, now lacked sufficient funds to adequately finance his opposition party. Ganiev further reported that the Pulatov brothers, who lead the Birlik opposition party from exile in the United States, still received grants from international donors, but did not adequately share funds with local activists still in Uzbekistan. Ganiev observed that most talented young Uzbeks today generally shied away from politics, but instead sought to work for wealthy Uzbek oligarchs in Russia and Kazakhstan. In addition, Ganiev said that Moscow-based Uzbek oligarch Alisher Usmanov appeared to be trying to curry favor with President Karimov's eldest daughter Gulnora, noting, for example, that Usmanov was a main benefactor of Gulnora's cultural organization Fund Forum.

KEEPING RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM IN CHECK

¶6. (C) Ganiev also noted that Karimov had effectively (if brutally) marginalized any potential opposition from religious extremists. Ganiev argued that Uzbekistan at independence had the potential to "become another Iran," as it was quickly infiltrated by several extremist groups who attempted to take advantage of a populace that was only rediscovering its Muslims heritage after decades of Soviet dominance. Ganiev argued that such extremists were dangerous individuals and that Karimov's repression of them was not an entirely negative phenomenon. Ganiev observed that while the Karimov regime had committed serious violations of human rights and religious freedom, it had nevertheless largely crushed the religious extremism threat. Lately, he noted that the NSS has unfortunately been clamping down hard on members of the banned conservative religious organization Nur, which reportedly counted several high-ranking officials among its adherents.

ECONOMIC SITUATION IN PROVINCES DETERIORATING

¶ 17. (C) Ganiev argued that deteriorating economic conditions in Uzbekistan's provinces, including the return of millions of Uzbek labor migrants from abroad, currently posed a far greater threat to the country's long-term stability than religious extremist groups. He noted that many rural families had grown dependent on remittances their relatives sent from abroad. However, since the start of the financial crisis, many of these labor migrants have lost their jobs in Russia and Kazakhstan and have been forced to return to Uzbekistan with no means to support themselves or their families.

SEES CHILD LABOR PROBLEM AS CLOSELY TIED TO RURAL POVERTY

¶ 18. (C) Ganiev argued that rural poverty was the main factor driving the participation of schoolchildren in the annual fall cotton harvest each year. While many adult laborers were reluctant to pick cotton in Uzbekistan because they could earn more money working abroad, their children still voluntarily participated in the cotton harvest each year to earn additional money to support their families. Ganiev noted that the children were willing to

TASHKENT 00000715 003 OF 003

accept low wages, even if it meant missing school, which supplemented their parents' income. Thus, he observed that local authorities usually did not need to force children to pick cotton. Instead, he explained that schools and farmers at the local level usually worked out unofficial (and illegal) agreements, whereby schools would provide farmers a certain number of students for the harvest. Schoolchildren, in turn, were mostly motivated to pick cotton as an opportunity to help support their families.

COMMENT

¶ 19. (C) Over the years, we have found Ganiev to be one of the more astute observers among the local community of independent activists. His observations track with our own: whereas last year we had been able to point to progress on human rights (ICRC access to prisons, some prisoner releases, etc.), this year we have largely seen backsliding by the GOU, in terms of a clampdown on NGO's and any possible independent political activity. This is principally due, we believe, to the confluence of four factors: (1) the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, which creates fear of a spill-over effect; (2) determination that any presidential succession process will not involve foreign "meddling;" (3) a similar determination to avoid surprises in the December parliamentary elections; and (4) the absence of political dialogue with the U.S. (and hence any particular need to show progress on human rights). The Uzbeks may also believe that the U.S. cares more about Afghan transit than about human rights, but the March 11 "women of courage" event honoring Mutabar Tadjibaeva, along with our repeated raising of human rights concerns in discussions with Uzbek officials, should disabuse them of this notion.

¶ 10. (C) While we hope Afghanistan will improve in the coming

months and thus the perceived threat of spill-over will abate, getting the Uzbeks to ease their grip on the process of transferring power will take renewed effort to persuade them that outsiders like us are not about regime change but rather about changing the behavior of the regime. Ultimately, of course, we are unlikely to see any burst of reform under Karimov. Neither, however, should we expect that his political demise, when it happens, will feature a flourishing of democracy. The public at large puts a premium on stability here, and any succession scenario is more likely to resemble that which took place in Turkmenistan two years ago than, say, Ukraine. Still, we need to keep chipping away at what is possible in hopes that a more hospitable climate for reform will emerge, and avoid steps that are counter-productive (such as sanctions). The upcoming May 18-19 visit of Deputy FM Karamatov to Washington offers an opportunity to remind the Uzbeks that we want a political dialogue in part because we need to see a resumption of progress on human rights and reform issues as a result of diplomatic engagement.

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